

**Disconnected in a Connected World**

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A couple sits at the same table in a busy restaurant, but they are worlds apart, their faces lit by the blue glow of their phones rather than the warmth of their conversation, focused on a digital connection instead of the person sitting across from them. Our social media era is now characterized by this scene representing modern disconnection. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have changed how people connect. Despite its benefits, social media distorts modern romantic relationships. The curated nature of online life, the constant need for validation, and the rise of jealousy all reveal the darker sides of social media. New studies show that social media platforms can help with initial connections, but they gradually harm relationships negatively: lack of communication, unhealthy comparison, and the normalization of parasocial attachments. Research consistently proves that social media presents new stressors affecting relationships and genuine connections.

The constant need to be on social media has affected the genuine connection with partners, causing a wedge between them and making their significant others feel outcasted. According to a recent study by Pew in "Dating and Relationships in the Digital Age." The Pew states that: "At the time of the survey, four-in-ten Americans who are married, living with a partner or who are in a committed relationship say they are often or sometimes bothered by the amount of time their partner spends on their cellphone, including 12% who say they feel this way often." (Pew, 2020, para.13)

One must acknowledge the evidence suggesting that social media shows how online engagement can pull people away from existing relationships. Overusing the phone during quality time or forming deep emotional connections with people on social media platforms

becomes a substitute for real intimacy. This alienation makes partners emotionally isolated despite being physically present. Ultimately, phones have become an obstacle to intimacy. Meanwhile, Pew's research has demonstrated compelling evidence for the disconnect between couples due to social media platforms. Recent findings suggest that another issue that partners run into is the constant comparison with the "perfect couple" in social media posts. Researcher Brody Woodell further supports this perspective in "The Impact of Social Media on Modern Relationships. Woodell points out that:

"From the perfect Instagram couple to the lovey-dovey Facebook posts, social media can make it seem like everyone else has a better relationship than you do. This can lead to feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and even depression. In some cases, it can even drive a wedge between partners, as one partner may feel like they can never live up to the idealized version of love they see online." (Woodell, 2024, para.6)

Social media does not merely suggest an ideal, and it actually creates an entirely false standard of perfection that undermines good relationships. When couples are continually subjecting themselves to these picture-perfect social media posts and heavily Photoshopped lifestyles, they're not merely superficially comparing. They're measuring their relationship against a harmful and false measuring stick. It is absurd that couples these days are increasingly abandoning appreciation for their authentic connection to chase after "likes" and fabricated "picture-perfect" appearances. We must recognize this dangerous trend and reject the harmful assumption that relationships must be stage-managed for presentation to others rather than being truly lived and enjoyed.

Overall, modern social media affects couples not only through perfect pictures and the constant scrolling on their phones but also through the partners of the parasocial relationship

built with celebrities and fictional characters. Alternative perspectives suggest that "People with intense personal parasocial relationships may feel the need to check the celebrity's social media every day or struggle to focus on other things, like work or school. These intense emotions may prevent you from building close bonds with other people, or cause rifts when those around you don't share your feelings." (Cleveland, 2023, Intense-personal parasocial relationships, para.2).

The Cleveland Clinic's recent findings in "Friend or Faux: Are Parasocial Relationships Healthy?" point out that parasocial relationships can cause rifts in relationships due to the obsession a partner builds with so-called celebrity. The conversation around this topic involves multiple perspectives, including the fact that parasocial relationships are harmless, but this evidence shows otherwise. Partners may feel like they are competing with a ghost and cannot get the same admiration that their significant others think towards that parasocial relationship. Thus, creating a wedge between them and others can count as a second partner.

Some may argue that social media can actually foster emotional growth and meaningful relationships. For example, in "The Perfect Match" by Ken Liu, "Sai looked forward to the date. Tilly had also introduced him to his last girlfriend, and that relationship had been wonderful. The breakup afterward was awful, of course, but it helped that Tilly had guided him through it. He felt that he had matured emotionally and after a month on his own, was ready to start a new relationship." (Liu, 2012, pg. 31 para. 3) This suggests that relationships formed through online connections can lead to emotional balance when no one is there to help you with a breakup or hardship. It highlights how social media doesn't automatically weaken relationships; instead, it can help individuals learn from past experiences and approach new ones with more maturity. However, while individual stories like Sai's show the potential for positive outcomes, they don't reflect the trend social media is creating. Most users are not navigating these platforms with the

same level of emotional support or awareness. In fact, most are continuously exposed to unrealistic portrayals of romance, constant distractions, and parasocial attachments that create unrealistic emotional expectations. These constant patterns are what make social media more harmful than helpful for romantic relationships.

Although there are exceptions where social media plays a helpful role in relationships, the overall impact stays negative, causing more distance, insecurity, and emotional disconnection between partners than genuine intimacy.

In today's digitally driven world, social media has transformed the way we communicate, but not always for the better. While it offers convenience and new forms of connection, its impact on romantic relationships is damaging. From disrupting meaningful communication to promoting harmful comparisons through idealized images and encouraging emotionally unbalanced parasocial attachments, social media often creates more distance than closeness between partners. Though some may find emotional growth through social media relationships, these cases are the exception, not the rule. To preserve the depth, trust, and authenticity that romantic relationships require, we must become more mindful of how we engage with social media and prioritize real human connection over virtual validation. As social media continues to grow, it is important to remember that true connection isn't found in likes, shares, or followers. It is built through trust, presence, and the vulnerability of face-to-face interaction.

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